

ALAN PLATER, DLITT

Where's the blushing bridegroom Mrs Milburn?

He's out the back washing himself

Cleanliness is next to godliness, you know..

Aye, I never could see it myself

Cleanliness you say? You ought to meet wor lass. Oh, she's a disgusting woman. Every time I want a piddle the sink's full of dirty dishes

When I told a friend I was to present Alan Plater to you Mr Chancellor, he immediately recounted this opening scene from his play, *Close the Coalhouse Door* which we both saw across at the Playhouse Theatre. The humour had a purpose. It engaged us with the story he was telling. Minutes later we are standing with Tommy Hepburn over on the Town Moor along with 20,000 miners. It's 1831, the year before my great-grandfather was born. In Durham, the final touches are being put to the successful bid to make us England's third university while in parliament Earl Grey is well advanced with the Great Reform Act which would earn him a permanent stand overlooking our town centre. Tommy's aspirations were more modest. He thought it unfair that a miner was not paid if a container weighing a third of a ton and filled in near darkness was more than 2 pound underweight or contained more than 4 lbs of stone. He wanted the miners to be given real money rather than be paid in credit at the company shop. And he considered it unreasonable that boys of 6 worked 18 hours a day in the pit.

For over 40 years Alan Plater has been using his consummate skill to make us care about such real people, past and present. His passion for

writing has made him a household name but he has never lost the desire to communicate real emotion, to make a meaningful social comment. An important aspect of his development was to have departed the banks of the Tyne under a bit of a cloud on not one but two occasions. The first was in 1938 when, at the age of 3, he was taken from his birthplace of Jarrow to Hull where his father replaced the job lost in the shipyards with a new one in the blacksmith's shop of the London and North Eastern Railway. As Chain Inspector he was responsible for the safety of the lifting gear on which the lives of the dockers depended though Alan later thought the title made him sound like a lavatory attendant. Alan's second Geordie coming was to study Architecture here in Newcastle but he didn't complete the course. Instead, he returned to Hull and took a post in an architect's office where a modest income was combined with immunity from National Service and time to write.

By 1961 he'd had an article published in *Punch* and one of his seven plays had made it to BBC radio. But things were looking up. Like his school friend Tom Courteney he found his northern roots had made him fashionable among the London elite, while the emergence of television drama provided a new medium for writers like Alan. In 1962 he began writing for the acclaimed TV programme *Z cars*. He made the likes of Colin Welland and Frank Windsor so believable we were able to overlook the fact that their police car clearly wasn't really connected to the back projection visible through the rear window. From then on he became an artistic fixture in British life and something of a tourist attraction to the locals as he sat in the window of Westbourne Avenue, Hull crouched over his typewriter, fag in hand. The lives of the Pankhurst sisters became "Shoulder to Shoulder" in 1974 while Chaucer found himself transcribed on to a bus trip to Wembley. In 1982 Alan

Rickman became Trollope's Obadiah Slope in the *Barchester Chronicles* and 2 years later he brought his own novel to the screen when James Bolam starred in the *Beiderbecke Affair*, a comic thriller with corrupt councillors and dead jazzmen. His "very British Coup" in 1988 received rave reviews while his tale of a wartime female swing band, *Last of the Blond Bombshells* in 2000 with Dame Judi Dench pursued by Ian Holm won him international acclaim including a BAFTA and Golden Globe.

Such success has not made him precious. He likes to write, whether it be last year's "Confessions of a City Supporter" at the Hull Truck Theatre or scripts for Bill Maynard in "Oh no, it's Selwyn Frogget" and he continues to draw on his life experience, though as a doctor I must encourage him to stop drawing on cigarettes because we want him to go on writing for many more years. I will end with more of his own words, this time from his play "I thought I Heard a Rustling" in which an unemployed Geordie with an autobiographical flavour, bluffs his way into being a writer in residence at the library of a southern town and pretends to be an architect on the back of an O level in technical drawing and a trip to see Durham Cathedral. Here, our able bodied hero Bill explains his pursuit of job satisfaction as a southern serf ;

"It's not much fun being invisible. You're certainly not invisible if you're the only waiter in the West End who's an ex-pitman with a false leg"

I got really good at limping. It's quite hard, you know, doing a good limp when there's nothing wrong with you. And I worked on the dialogue as well. The noble Geordie savage speaks "yes sir, I can heartily recommend the sole bon femme, it's made to a traditional peasant recipe very popular in parts of West Hartlepool"; "Yes madame, you'll find the Chardonnay a very amusing wine, sharp on the palate good for the

complexion and guaranteed to give you naughty ideas in the early hours of the morning”. It was all a load of crap, but if you say it in a broad Geordie accent and remember to limp, your away”

Mr Chancellor, it’s a bit late, but I think it’s time we made an honest man of Alan Plater by awarding him the degree of Doctor of Letters honoris causa.

Citation by Professor John Burn